

Parent Development

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PEDIATRICIANS have three primary tasks: To treat children when they are ill, to keep children physically and mentally healthy, and to promote healthy parent-child relationships.^{1,3,6,7} The American Board of Pediatrics, recognizing that a practicing pediatrician can no longer be merely a specialist in the diseases of childhood, has for many years insisted that the essentials of child growth and development be emphasized in pediatric specialty training.

But children are not the only members of the family who grow. Mothers and fathers also progress through definite stages of development as parents. A pediatrician, often working more closely with the parents than with the child, must consider parental emotional development. Otherwise his efforts to help a child medically may be frustrated by his inability to work successfully with the mother and father.

Even if he recognizes the successive stages of development in relation to their child through which the adults must pass, the pediatrician may be unable to help for want of skill in counseling. The day has passed when a physician may hope to give advice and have it reverently obeyed by the majority of his patients. Parents are inundated with advice from innumerable sources, and many have become either bewildered or immune. Pediatric advice, although well-intentioned and sound, may bring about totally unexpected and undesirable results.

Skill in aiding parent development depends upon two factors, a knowledge of the stages of normal emotional growth through which the parents must progress, and an ability to encourage the parents' insight into their problems by expert listening and observation.^{3,7} In the simplest terms, the pediatrician must learn to advise less and to listen more.

Normally, parents pass through at least four, and probably five stages of emotional growth and cognition. Each stage reflects the major problems in the child's development^{1,6,7,8,9} with which the parent is grappling. The stages are not rigidly defined. One does not terminate when another begins, and the mother or father who has progressed to a later stage may still be working on problems held over from earlier periods. Early development lays the groundwork for the later phases when child and parent are more mature. Because the stages only have meaning if considered in relation to the child's development,

• Today's parents tend to be overwhelmed with advice from many sources. In his role as family counselor, the pediatrician must understand and consider the emotional development of parents in relation to their child's development; otherwise, his advice and counsel do not "take" and he becomes tired and frustrated and angry.

Parents progress through definite stages of development: Stage 1: *Learning the cues*—the struggle of the parents to interpret the infant's needs. Stage 2: *Learning to accept growth and development*—the parent learning to accept some loss of control of the toddler. Stage 3: *Learning to separate*—the parent learning to allow the child to develop independently. Stage 4: *Learning to accept rejection, without deserting*—the struggle of the parents not to intrude and yet to be there when needed. Stage 5: *Learning to build a new life having been thoroughly discredited by one's teenager*—the parent learning to live independently while the teenager struggles to develop his own identity.

The pediatrician who is accepting, sensitive and a good listener and who keeps in mind that parents as well as children have capacities for growth and development, will be a potent factor in promoting good parent-child relationships and many times more effective in dealing with the child in health and disease.

parents go through the same stages with each child, although parental experience may modify the stages to some extent.

1. Learning the cues

*Many an infant that screams like a calliope
Could be soothed by a little attention to his diopie.*

OGDEN NASH

During the earliest months of their baby's life, the parents' most bewildering problem is to find out what the baby is trying to tell them. The infant is completely dependent upon them for his relatively simple needs—food, fondling, physical care. Spock⁹ commented that an infant is "physically helpless and emotionally agreeable." Throughout this phase, which Erikson² calls the period of "trust," he needs to establish confidence in his mother and in his environment. This trust will provide the foundation for his further development.

Despite earnest effort, parents often remain unable to interpret the individual cues by which the baby tries to express his needs.¹⁰ Does he cry because he is hungry, tired, wet, or spoiled? They also have lingering doubts about the infant's physical

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STAGE ONE - INFANT
PARENT DEVELOPMENT: LEARNING THE CUES
ERIKSON: TRUST
**SPOCK: PHYSICALLY HELPLESS,
 EMOTIONALLY AGREEABLE**
**OGDEN NASH: MANY AN INFANT THAT
 SCREAMS LIKE A CALLIOPE
 COULD BE SOOTHED BY A
 LITTLE ATTENTION TO HIS DIOPE**

STAGE TWO - TODDLER
**PARENT DEVELOPMENT: LEARNING TO
ACCEPT GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT**
ERIKSON: AUTONOMY
**SPOCK: A SENSE OF HIS OWN INDIVID-
 UALITY AND WILL POWER - VACILLATES
 BETWEEN DEPENDENCE AND INDEPENDENCE**
**OGDEN NASH: THE TROUBLE WITH A
 KITTEN IS THAT
 EVENTUALLY IT BECOMES A CAT**

status. The pediatrician may become frustrated or angry because the parents do not accept his reassurance or because they reject his advice regarding the technique of handling the child. If he keeps in mind, however, that the parents are in the stage of "learning the cues," he may see that the parents *cannot* carry out his suggestions because they have not yet mastered their first lesson. For example:

The mother of a six-month-old infant became extremely perturbed because the child screamed constantly. Two former pediatricians had suggested numerous techniques; she had tried to apply them, but the baby continued to cry.

The young woman was encouraged to talk about the problem as she saw it. She said: "My sister lives with us. She has a job and helps support us. She has always done everything better than I. When she holds the baby, he never cries; so I let her take care of him whenever I can." Jealousy of the sister was evident in her tone. When she had finished telling her story, she got up without waiting for the baby to be examined, expressed her thanks, and marched out of the office. A month later she returned. Laughingly, she explained that she had gone home, "told her sister off" and started taking care of the baby herself. The child had stopped crying except when hungry or uncomfortable.

This mother had been blocked from "learning the cues" because she had carried over into her relationship with her child, her negative feelings regarding her sister. Insight into those feelings helped her to develop a good relationship with her baby and to meet his needs more adequately.

2. Learning to accept growth and development

*The trouble with a kitten is that
 Eventually it becomes a cat.*

OGDEN NASH

The parents of the toddler can no longer exert omnipotent control over their offspring. Although he continues to need love and attention from them, the toddler has gained motility and begins to assert his

STAGE THREE - PRE SCHOOLER
**PARENT DEVELOPMENT: LEARNING TO
SEPARATE**
ERIKSON: INITIATIVE
**SPOCK: IMITATION THRU ADMIRATION -
 LEARNS ABOUT FRIENDS - PRELIM
 INTEREST IN SEXUALITY**
**OGDEN NASH: BUT JOY IN HEAPING-
 MEASURE COMES
 TO CHILDREN WHOSE PARENTS
 ARE UNDER THEIR THUMBS**

independence. Spock⁹ spoke of "a sense of his own individuality and will power" and "vacillation between dependence and independence." Erikson² called this the period of "autonomy," since it represents the earliest development of self-reliance and self-control. Many parents who "just love babies" find it difficult or impossible to tolerate the toddler, who is "so cute, but—!"

Again, the pediatrician may find that to discuss the youngster's "feeding problem" and "bad sleep patterns" is futile as long as he concentrates solely upon the growing child's needs. His suggestions may be more fruitful if, before offering them, he considers that the parents are being called upon to enter a new phase of maturity. They must learn to accept the growth of their child, and they need help in adapting to the child at his new developmental level.

The mother of a two-year-old boy complained that he would not eat, that he got into everything, and that spanking did not help. She was reassured that all children go through this stage but she appeared unimpressed. A few weeks later she returned, pleading that the child be given a sedative. In response to a suggestion that she talk over her background and experiences, she said that she had been the older of two children and had always felt that

her young brother was the favored child. He had grown into a ne'er-do-well. She blamed her mother for having spoiled him.

Her projection of this disturbed relationship into her concern for her child's behavior and into her own inability to control it, was obvious. At the end of the visit she forgot to repeat her request for sedation. During subsequent visits, discussions of the "terrible two" were continued. The insight gained by both mother and pediatrician seemed to help her through this second stage of parent development.

3. Learning to separate

*But joy in heaping measure comes
To children whose parents are under their thumbs.*

OGDEN NASH

We are accustomed to speak of the separation anxiety of the two-year-old child as he approaches the outside world and friendships. The separation is equally difficult for the parents. Mothers and fathers are told that they must allow the child to assert himself, to explore, to show initiative; at the same time, they are told that they must set limits. Understandably, the parent asks: "How do I encourage initiative in my child? Must I let him wreck my home? If not, then what do you mean by 'sensible limits'?"

The preschool child has gained considerable motility. He develops positive feelings toward his parents and parent-substitutes. Spock⁸ spoke of the child's "imitation through admiration." The preschool child has an active phantasy life, and fears are a common phenomenon; but he gains functional pleasure through mastery. Erikson² called this the stage of "initiative." The parent can cope with this new phase in the child's development only if he himself learns to accept separation.

The mother of a girl two and a half years of age complained that the child was demanding, high-strung and clinging, and that she had frequent tantrums. A pediatrician had told her that the youngster needed to have firm limits set for her; but the mother commented, "I never give in to her tantrums. Still she screams whenever she's thwarted, and she still clings to me all the time." The child appeared to be a happy, outgoing little girl.

In further conversation, the mother revealed early feelings of resentment toward the child, whom she had not wanted. Her sense of guilt regarding this resentment led her to overcompensate, so that she was unable either to set limits or to allow the child to separate from her and develop independently.

Here again, pediatric advice had fallen short. Yet, when the mother was given an opportunity to air her feelings in even a brief discussion, she seemed to gain considerable insight. The problem which had appeared to be the child's, she now saw as her own. Within a few weeks, she reported that the tantrums

STAGE FOUR - SCHOOL AGER

**PARENT DEVELOPMENT: LEARNING TO
ACCEPT REJECTION---WITHOUT DESERTING**

ERIKSON: INDUSTRY

SPOCK: FITTING INTO OUTSIDE GROUP.

INDEPENDENCE OF PARENTS AND

STANDARDS-DEVELOPING CONSCIENCE-

NEED TO CONTROL AND MAKE MORAL

OGDEN NASH: CHILDREN AREN'T HAPPY

WITH NOTHING TO IGNORE

AND THAT'S WHAT PARENTS

WERE CREATED FOR

and clinging behavior had ceased. Improvement in the child had proved impossible until the mother had achieved the third stage in parent development, the ability to separate.

4. Learning to accept rejection, without deserting

*Children aren't happy with nothing to ignore
And that's what parents were created for.*

OGDEN NASH

The parents of a child of school age must learn to accept what may seem to them to be total rejection by their offspring. On entering school, the boy or girl begins to manifest overt independence of his parents and their standards. Spock⁹ described the "middle-aged child's" efforts to fit into the outside group and to move away from his parents. He mentioned the child's strict conscience, his attempts to control and to make moral his aggressive and sexual drives. Piaget⁴ delineated the ways in which the social life of children gives rise to an inner discipline. Erikson² termed this the stage of "industry or work completion." At this stage the child learns to win recognition by producing things.

Parents react to the child's declaration of independence in a variety of ways. They may feel hurt, disappointed or angry even to the point of deserting the youngster. Despite his appearance of self-assertiveness, the middle-aged boy or girl still needs plenty of parental support; but the support must be given unobtrusively, without heckling, and it must be accompanied by respect for the child's feelings and his pride.

The mother of an eight-year-old girl stated that the child was withdrawn, unhappy, and hostile to her sister. Attempts to counsel this mother in the usual way, with reassurance, discussion of sibling rivalry and the emotional climate in the home, failed miserably. When, a few months later, the mother returned for a second visit with the same complaints, a new approach was tried. The pediatrician stopped advising and listened. As she talked, they both began to realize that she was deeply hurt by her daugh-

ter's seeming rejection. The woman, who had never had a good relationship with her own mother, prided herself on the wonderful relationship she had built up with this child. The previous reassurance that she had received regarding the emotional pattern of her daughter's age group took on new meaning for her. A few months later she reported that her daughter had "blossomed forth"; and although the child continued to be jealous of her sister, the mother now felt able to cope with her difficulty.

This mother was able to work out the fourth stage of parent development with little help, because she had mastered the earlier stages.

5. Learning to build a new life

**O adolescence!
I'd like to be present I must confess
When thine own adolescents adolesce!*

OGDEN NASH

There is probably a fifth stage of parent development. Facetiously, we may call it *learning to build a new life, having been thoroughly discredited by one's teenager*. Erikson² wrote of the adolescent's problem as one of "identity versus role diffusion"—the struggle of the teenager to find himself. The antics and actions of the teenager as he struggles to develop a sense of ego identity may seem irrational to adults, and may be hard on parents. Redl⁵ described the adolescent as "peer oriented" but with a keen sense of fair play; Redl counseled parents to confine any necessary conflict to specific and major issues at hand; and he urged them to respect the feelings of the young people and to avoid constant criticism because it undermines morale and relationships.

This phase, like the preceding ones, calls for a new stage of parental development. The pediatrician has an opportunity to stress, in his discussion with the parents of adolescents, that the period has positive values for the adults as well as for their children. The mother and father now have the opportunity to rebuild their own lives, more or less inde-

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STAGE FIVE - TEEN-AGER

PARENT DEVELOPMENT: LEARNING TO BUILD A NEW LIFE HAVING BEEN THOROUGHLY DISCREDITED BY ONE'S TEEN AGER

ERIKSON : IDENTITY

REDL: CONFLICT TO BE CONFINED TO SPECIFIC AND MAJOR ISSUES AT HAND - PEER ORIENTATION AND FAIR PLAY

OGDEN NASH : O ADOLESCENCE!--I'D LIKE TO BE PRESENT I MUST CONFESS
WHEN THINE OWN ADOLESCENTS ADOLESC!

pendently of their children. To the extent that they achieve this positive outlook, they may become more tolerant of their offspring's behavior. The parent who has mastered the fifth stage of development does not intrude upon his son or daughter, but stays quietly in the background, ready to give support and help as they are needed.

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